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On the Edge of History and Philosophy



On the research and the writing phase of the historian's work

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The difficulty in criticising the whole work of any author lies in its historical nature. I would expect people to change their views, revise or even re-write their work over a period of 15 years and I myself had a great deal of difficulty with people putting all my work together, and treating it as if it were all produced within the same very short time span. But they do this all the time and then act surprised that they find certain contradictions or inconsistencies. To which my response is: "Yes, I would hope so." I would hope that I changed (slightly) over all those years. Therefore, to look for contradictions in a body of work spanning 30 or 40 years, especially in fields that do not have technical languages, which a field like a historical writing certainly does not, seems uninteresting to me.

I believe that historical writing is more profitably approached as associative writing rather than as disciplinary writing of a scientific kind in which the logical law of non-contradiction controls the evolution of an argument. I believe that historical writing, especially in a narrative mode, cannot be understood by bringing to it criteria of scientific consistency, logical consistency and so forth.

So I'm not going to try to look for some contradiction or confusion in Chris Lorenz's writings and say that what he said 15 years ago contradicts what he says today, and then ask him to straighten things out satisfactorily. I want, rather, to know primarily what Lorenz in his critical note might want. What does he desire? What would he like to see happen? Would he like me to say "Oh yes, I got it all wrong, you're right!" I would be perfectly willing to concede that. I won't say you misread me because everybody misreads everybody else. No one ever gets even

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one's own writing quite right. The common response to every review is: "Oh! You misunderstood me! You misread me!" I think only that you read me. And this is the reason why I am not going to reply to you.

My approach to you would not be to characterise, not to sum up, not to paraphrase what you said but to quote you. My approach to historical writing is this: not to sum up, not to give the biography of the author in order to explain his historiography. Rather look at, look at the historiography itself, look at its most superficial aspects, its most manifest aspects, what it says on the page, and do a grammatical, dictional and semantic analysis of what is said, not what you find logically implied by it or what was logically presupposed by it. In fields like historiography, which are not scientific in any strict sense of the term, one needs a critical principle somewhat different from that obtaining in real sciences – by which I mean disciplines with experimental controls over their subjects.

Typically, philosophers above all say, "Oh, what Wittgenstein meant to say was this" and then they criticise their paraphrase or condensed version of what Wittgenstein meant to say. I believe this is what Lorenz does consistently. He does not take a patch of text written by a historian and analyse it. Rather, he asks: what's going on here? What he does, he does very well. His critical work is a tissue of citation, quotation, paraphrase and so forth of other people's work. Often, he falls back on someone else's paraphrase of their work and criticises it on the basis of that kind of paraphrase. I'm just saying, as Wittgenstein would say: back to the rough ground, you know, let's have some texts, back to the texts, let's look at the text. What does a given historian really say. Not what did he mean to say. Not what did he want to do. Let's look at what he wrote. Let's use that as the basis. I think Lorenz fails to do that (for example, he criticised a historian for failing to provide causal explanation for the rise of Nazism, even though this historian explicitly indicated he was not trying to establish a scientifically responsible explanation of the phenomenon).

On the other hand, he knows what he wants, I think. Or does he know what he wants? What? Do you, Chris, desire anything intellectually? Is there something you would like to see? Or see happen? What is your utopia? I'd like to know that, you see? What would you like people to do? You might say, "We should be more scientific" and we should understand science as I understand it and want it to be. I'll accept that. I'll accept it. This should lead me therefore to change what I do, right? That is, if I'm sincere and if this is an ideal conversational situation among philosophers.

Philosophers find it difficult to admit that another philosopher has got them right. And they find it difficult to change, no matter what kind of criticism is brought against them. They tend to be what psychoanalysts call "anal-retentive". As far as I know, the only philosophical system that was ever definitively criticised and determined by general consensus to be completely wrong was that of Herbert Spencer in the 19th century. His whole system – everyone agreed – was completely mistaken and by the end of the century no one would quote him. Now Lorenz says "philosophy of history has in the recent past drifted away from philosophy of science and social science in the direction of philosophy of art, literature, rhetoric and aesthetics".¹ I take that to be a negative judgment. It is a mistake, right? Which was made by philosophers of history? Well, obviously, me – and a few others. (Ankersmit? Not many others.) But has not philosophy itself moved away from "philoso-

phy of science and the social sciences” as well? Does one lament this move? Why? What is lost? What is threatened? It is only “philosophy of history”.

The other thing he says is that everybody who is interested in historians’ narratives wants to distinguish between the research phase and the writing phase of the historian’s operations, right? He has said it again and again for many decades now. White (in *Metahistory*) ignores the whole research dimension of historical writing. And this means, I take it, that having ignored the research phase of historians’ activities, what I have to say about historical writing or, more precisely, writing by historians cannot be taken seriously. Well, that is alright with me. If anyone thinks that you cannot say anything worthwhile about the writing of historians or the genre of historical writing without rewriting the history of historical research, they are certainly welcome to that view. Even in *Metahistory*, however, I dealt with historians’ and philosophers of history’s views on historical causation.

I took it for granted that everybody already knows about the research phase of different historians’ activities. My problem was: how do historians or anyone else concerned with the past get from the research phase to the writing up of what they discovered in the research phase. That was the problem that no one I had ever read, writing about historiography and historical writing, had ever addressed. What is involved in the “turn” from the “research phase” to the writing phase? None of my graduate students knew how to do it either. They were in archives for years, taking notes, organising their notes, writing a chapter, throwing it out, revising it, giving it to the professors (who usually said, no, it is too long, or no, it is too short, or more information, more data, shorter paragraphs, etc, etc, go back, do more work). How do you get to the point where you could say “Oh, now I know what I want to say, and I’ll start writing?”

That’s a very interesting theoretical – as well as a practical – problem. How do you move from the research phase to the writing up of the research and what changes can occur between the assembly of the research notes and the writing of a chapter in a history. Because important changes do occur. I’ve seen it myself; I end the research phase with a big stack of notes, then I write something up: and gradually I throw this out. I throw that out and try to arrange it in different ways and try to write about it.

But number three: you don’t know what you’re going to write until you start writing – and it is the writing (of historians) that I’m talking about. I am not talking about fiction-writing, but about historical writing as a species of the general category of an activity – writing – which is itself a process of discovery. Writing. What you do when you try to write up your research notes is to find out what you have found in the research. So there’s no way of separating the research from the writing after the research has been finished. It’s a process of composition from the beginning; the selection of the materials, organising them, and writing about them are all phases of the compositional activity. And since it is writing that we are concerned with in any discussion of historiography, I thought we needed something like a theory of writing, or theory of literary writing, in order to look at those historians whose work had been presented in a narrative mode. I didn’t try to generalise about historians who write technical articles on (discreet) research topics. I was talking about narrative writing in the period in which the narrative was the dominant mode of reporting one’s research.

Now, we often will disagree on the different practices of historians. And historians who are doing the daily work of historians may very well have no interest in the kind of thoughts that Ankersmit or White might set forth about narrative. They may very well feel that it is the research that counts, not the mode or manner of presentation. But permit me to stress that we have been writing about the writing of historians, not their research techniques – on which, by the way, there is very little disagreement nowadays. And we grant them that. Historians know what they're doing in their research. What they often don't know is what they're doing in their writing, in their writing after their research. And that often is not a matter of aesthetics; it's a matter of creativity or failure of imagination. It has to do with the imagination, just as research has to do with going through the materials in order to construct an object in imagination that would be a possible object of scientific enquiry. The object has to be constructed as a possible object of scientific enquiry before you can bring the analytical tools to bear upon it.

So I wasn't trying to deconstruct historical writing. I was trying to write a history of historical writing, not a history of historical research, not a history of the philosophy of history. I said, no one has ever tried to write a history of historical writing that took historians' writings as the primary sources. So, for me what the historians wrote was the primary sources. Not what they thought they would like to have written, not their lives, not their formal statements. What they said. And I brought to my consideration of this question linguistics and literary techniques of analysis in order to show how they put things together in and by writing. In an associative mode, the one thing that a narrative is not is a set of logical arguments. They had arguments, didn't they? Of course, historians offer arguments but in addition to the argument by narrativisation which constitutes the substance of the content of the story they tell. But the totality, in which the narrative and the argument are fused, is dissociative. I mean that it's held together by commonsense notions of similarity, contiguity, synecdoche, things of that sort. A history is an extended discourse. It's not just a sequence of declarative sentences.

Finally, Lorenz says, and I quote; I do not paraphrase, I quote: "A scientific historical explanation must contain one empirical causal law." I would like him to give us just one example of what he means here? Give me an example of an empirical causal law of history – a law like the law of gravity, the law of attraction at a distance of different masses. Give me one empirical causal law that historians or philosophers of history have been able to identify – and use for predictive or explanatory purposes.

NOTE

- 1 Chris Lorenz, "Can histories be true? Narrativism, positivism, and the 'metaphorical turn'", *History and Theory* 37/3 (1998): 309–329, here 310.